

Alison Donkin

Ali is the heart and soul behind the creation of a new Recovery College for North Tyneside. Ali works for VODA, a registered charity that passionately believes in the power of volunteers and community groups to change people's lives for the better. For nearly 30 years VODA has been the 'beating heart' of the voluntary and community sector in North Tyneside, providing essential support to hundreds of volunteers and community groups each year.

Two years ago VODA was approached by North Tyneside Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and asked to support the creation of a new Recovery College for local adults. Since then, Ali have worked alongside adults with lived experience of mental ill-health to build a successful and thriving programme called NT Life – <https://voda.org.uk/ntlif/>

In something of a departure for VODA the job specification included lived experience as a desirable asset. This was a key factor in Ali being the standout candidate for the role and it has been a great appointment.

Above and beyond

Ali has established the NT Life service on the belief that people with lived experience of mental ill-health have a unique contribution to make towards supporting others to manage their own conditions. The key to the service

development has been Ali's 'listen-first' approach. During her first few weeks and months she carried out a range of outreach and listening events directly engaging with potential users of the service to find out what they would want. The services offered have been directly shaped by engagement with those who have support needs. We are very proud of the way Ali created the project from scratch, she laid a really good foundation for success.

Ali's approach to delivery adopts an asset-based Social Action approach to her work, focussing on people's strengths, identity and potential, rather than their medical diagnosis. Ali is able to draw on people's own lived experience to support others and recognise the valuable role people with lived experience can play in ensuring services are designed around people's needs.

During Lockdown Ali created an innovative approach to reaching out to and supporting NT Life volunteers and participants. 250 Little Boxes of Hope, containing a variety of items to be used for self-care, were delivered to people's homes in response to the impact Lockdown was having on the mental health and wellbeing of NT Life participants. Ali was keen to take action upon becoming aware that many people were experiencing loneliness, anxiety, fear and for those already dealing with life and mental health challenges, it made those hardships heavier to bear. The boxes were a reminder that we were in this together and we'll get through it. By receiving an unexpected gift Ali hoped it would remind people that they matter and that they were valued and that someone was thinking of them.

Ali contributes generously, outside of her immediate role, to supporting her colleagues as well as external organisations. Ali has delivered several free workshops on team building and personal development for the benefit of voluntary and community groups and young volunteers in North Tyneside. She has also delivered mindfulness sessions for her VODA colleagues to help deal with the pressures of home working and living through a pandemic.

Impact

“I was referred to North Tyneside Recovery College end of October 2019 by my GP and counsellor after having two breakdowns and suffering from depression and serious mental problems for many years. I am a completely different person in February 2021 compared to the person I was in October 2019 when I first presented to North Tyneside Recovery College and it is 100% down to the empowering and inspirational impact and positive influence that Ali has had on me. Ali’s warmth, energy and altruism had an immediate impact on me and the most important thing was that Ali believed in me when many others over the years had given up on me as a lost cause which had a very positive and transformational effect on me and I can’t thank Ali enough for all the amazing hard work Ali has done. Ali helped to boost the morale of vulnerable people and people with mental health problems with messages, phone calls, helping people with errands and home visits during the lockdown in 2020 which helped prevent a decline in people’s health and mental and many people are alive now because of Ali’s hard work and intervention.” Philip

“Ali is one of the most genuine, congruent people I have met in a world where authenticity is so often lacking. Her lived experience brings with it a deep empathy for and understanding of the challenges which most of us at NT Life face. She is without a doubt the superglue which has stuck our NT Life ‘family’ together, through thick and thin. Ali is always very inclusive and crucially makes sure that everyone is listened to, heard and understood. She has a great knack of being able to help others see different, more positive perspectives and has a gift for being able to spot others hidden talents/skills and bring them to the fore. I am in awe of how much she has helped us all to develop as individuals and collectively as a recovery college too. I feel pride in witnessing so many changed people, eureka moments and new learning that she has helped to inspire with her enthusiastic, engaging and fun nature.

Personally, I’m grateful for the support which Ali has given to me, including the ‘Talk Tech & Tinker’ sessions which I have run and now the ‘Snap Out Of It!’ mindful photography group. She is there whenever I have a question and works tirelessly behind the scenes to keep things going, including dealing with offering a safe provision during COVID-19. In fact, my perception is that a lot of the support she provides slips under the radar and would never be visible or apparent on an appraisal form- this puts me in mind of a quote from Albert Einstein: ‘Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts’. I ask myself, how could you begin to quantify the happiness, development, hope and purpose that she routinely brings to us at NT Life?” Paul

“She cares deeply for the college and for all of us and always does her best to help people. I know she has inspired lots of the students to be able to facilitate themselves. Ali’s had a rough few months in her personal life but always manages to paint on a smile even though she’s hurting inside. I know just how exhausting that can be, but when you’re working with people with mental health conditions, you have to be upbeat. It is very hard to do and Ali has done amazingly well in that respect. Running the college is not just a job to Ali, she’s

in it 100% and you can tell she loves it. ” Julie

Sustained impact

One of the unexpected outcomes of Ali’s work has been the ripple effect that her passion and innovative approach has had on colleagues and external organisations. The Little Boxes of Hope project gained significant awareness via word of mouth and publicity, and as a result Ali received a number of requests to replicate this work with a number of charitable and private sector organisations. She was also asked to get involved with the Young Mayor of North Tyneside’s project for teenagers returning to school after lockdown.

Ali’s commitment to partnership working and collaboration has helped to sustain and grow the level of mental health provision across the borough of North Tyneside. Working alongside other charities such as Newcastle United Foundation and Meadow Well Connected Ali has been able to develop new

approaches to supporting local residents using hooks such as sports and creative writing.

Ali has managed to build real capacity within the NT Life service by supporting individuals to gradually progress from learners to teachers. She not only offers her own support and guidance but enables individuals to gain recognised qualifications and develop as trainers in areas such as Wellness Recovery Action Planning (WRAP).

“She is always encouraging and positive in her support for students and facilitators alike. So many have become much more confident and I would go as far as to say that their lives have improved greatly since joining the college.”

Julie

Recently, Ali’s person-led approach has provided a blueprint for the development of a Young Person’s Recovery College. Ali has spoken to local service providers about her positive experience of involving people in the initial and on-going design of the NT Life service. This co-production approach is still a bit of a mystery and challenge for many of us, as it involves bravely sharing power with others, but Ali’s enthusiasm and success story has proved inspirational.

The NT Life programme continues to grow at pace thanks to Ali’s innovative and inclusive approach to providing mental health and wellbeing support. In recognition of this progress, we have been able to attract additional funding and Ali is now mentoring a new co-worker.

We believe that, thanks to Ali's incredible talent, passion and commitment, the NT Life project will continue to go from strength to strength.